

11-20-1990

Interview with Eddie Ray Edmundson (FA 73)

Manuscripts & Folklife Archives
Western Kentucky University, mssfa@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist



Part of the [Business Commons](#), and the [Folklore Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Folklife Archives, Manuscripts &, "Interview with Eddie Ray Edmundson (FA 73)" (1990). *FA Oral Histories*. Paper 368.
https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist/368

This Transcription is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in FA Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

INTERVIEW INFORMATION

Interviewer: Amy Taylor
Department of Modern Languages
and Intercultural Studies
Programs in Folk Studies
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky 42101

Interviewee: Eddie Ray Edmunson
Route 3, Box 145 A
Pikeville, North Carolina

Place of Interview: Planter's Tobacco Warehouse
410 5th Street
Bowling Green, Kentucky

Equipment Used: Sony TCDMS cassette recorder

Cassette Tape: Sony HF60
Normal Bias
No noise reduction

Amount of Tape Used: Side One: All
Side Two: 2/3

Brief Description: Mr. Edmunson talks about his career as a tobacco auctioneer, explains how tobacco is auctioned, discusses the burley and flu-cured tobacco markets, and explains the relationships between buyers, supervisors, farmers, the warehouse, and the auctioneer.

Symbols: T: = Amy Taylor speaking
E: = Eddie Edmunson speaking

Notes: Throughout the interview, Mr. Edmunson refers to "back home" and "at home." Both phrases refer to North Carolina and the flu-cured market in North Carolina.

* * *

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE

004 T: This is Amy Taylor. It's November 20, 1990. I'm with auctioneer Eddie Edmunson at Planter's Warehouse at 410 5th Street in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Could you tell me a little bit about your history--career history in tobacco auctioneering?

E: Well, when I was, uh, young, growing up we always farmed, had tobacco. And my father, he, uh, ran a warehouse in Wilson, North Carolina. (T: Um um.) And, uh, I was always around the warehouse, always around tobacco growing up, and when I got old enough, I went over to the warehouse and, uh, all I did was unload trucks for a long time. And, uh, one day Daddy said, "Eddie," said, "Son, you've got to find something better to do than unload trucks." He said, "How about marking tickets?" I said, "Well, I don't know if I can mark tickets or not. He said, "Well, how about auctioneering?" I said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "Well, how about giving it a try?"

030 So, uh, I went to auctioneering school in Greenville, North Carolina and it was taught by Ray Owensby, which was--used to be a real good auctioneer. And I think he was up here in Kentucky for years, and years, and years. But he was from Greenville, North Carolina. And he taught auctioneering school. And it was for, uh, auctioneers and ticket markers. So, I went to that school. Then I left from there and went to La North Community College to get my licence. And, uh-- And once I got those, I came back over to the warehouse and, uh, I started around there for a right good while. And then one day, Daddy said, "Alright Son, it's time for you to get in the sale." And, uh, me, I was scared to death. And, uh, I said, "Well--." I got in there. He said, "You can't make any mistakes." He said, "I'm running the sale. If you get in trouble just knock it to the warehouse."

043 So, I don't know how many I knocked to the warehouse to begin with but it was a whole lot and I was nervous. I don't even remember who I knocked the first ten or twelve piles to, when I first got up there you know. But that's how I got started: with my Daddy helping me. He was behind me, you know. I know there's a lot of good auctioneers, that as long as long as they're by theirselves, or something, they sound good. But getting up in front of a crowd, and actually doing it, is something different, you know. [T: Um um.] And uh--You, uh, got to gain confidence. And with my fathers help I was able to gain enough confidence, you know to carry on and keep on going. (T: Um um.) But uh, I'm still auctioneering, you know, I didn't ever stop, see. He got me started and I kept on going.

056 T: So does your family still own that warehouse?

E: No, we sold the warehouse once he got killed--in, uh, 1980. We sold it in 1982. And then I continued working there until four years ago, and I went to work at Drigstoll warehouse in Wilson. And uh, I've been working there ever since. It was a bigger job; sold more tobacco, you know. And I didn't have anything holding me where I was, you know,

once we sold, so I moved over there. Uh, Wilson is the world's largest flu-cured tobacco market. This year we sold ninety-two million pounds. At--We have sold over a hundred million pounds in years past. But, uh, with it being cut--it's being cut, you know, and this year was--but we sold ninety-two million this year. Uh, Lexington [Kentucky] is the world's largest burley market. And Wilson's the world's largest flu-cured market.

071 T: For flu-cured, that figure ninety-two million, is that for the county or for the entire state?

E: That was for the Wilson market.

T: That's just for that market.

E: Wilson market. And the way they have--the way it is in, uh, North Carolina, you have a hundred miles designation radius. Like if a farmer's outside of a hundred miles of the market, he can't sell there. You got to be within a hundred miles radius (T: I see.) of the market to sell. Uh, that hadn't been in effect but probably five or six years. It used to you could--anybody could come--you could come from far away, you know, and bring it. We used to have a lot of tobacco that came from Georgia and South Carolina. When they'd get through they'd bring it to North Carolina up there and sell it. But now they can't do that.

083 T: Why did that change?

E: Well, it was just--they passed this law, and you know, it was just a law they passed, 'cause uh--. I--I never figured it out. I don't know why either, you know, they changed it. But, I think it was 'cause of the local markets, the smaller markets, people were just bypassing those. Like a man had a small market, you know, near his hometown or something, he really couldn't--he'd bring it to a bigger market. And he feels like he can get more money for it, in the bigger market. Uh, at smaller markets, you have to pay for the hauling, and uh, and when you're shipping tobacco out and everything they charge and everything shipping it out. Where at Wilson all the plants are right there so you get a little bit more for it because you don't have to pay as much to get it, you know, to get it there. It's always there in Wilson. There's about four or five tobacco companies in Wilson.

T: What other markets do you go to besides Bowling Green and Wilson?

E: That's it. (T: That's it.) That's it. Wilson and Bowling Green. Oh, I--I sold in Lexington, uh, two years. And uh,

sold at Franklin [Kentucky] over here when they had a market in Franklin.

T: That's burley?

E: And one-sucker. I sold one-sucker and burley over there. You'd sell one sucker in the mornings and burley in the afternoon. Or you'd sell visa versa.

103 T: What do you mean by a sucker?

E: One-sucker. It's a type of tobacco.

T: Oh.

E: It was for chewing tobacco and snuff.

T: Okay.

E: It was handled differently and looked different. But now they still have a one-sucker market, but I think it's in Russellville [Kentucky] that they still sell one-sucker. They hadn't sold it here in about four or five years.
[pause]

T: Okay.

E: It was a whole lot cheaper, the one-sucker. You know, it was a lot cheaper--just a different kind of tobacco--flu-cured tobacco.

T: And they don't grow it much now?

E: No, it's not--Well, they still raise some around here. They still raise some. But its, its--I think Russellville's the only place it's sold around here, one-sucker. Which I might be wrong about that you know. Might be another market.

117 T: Okay. How many months out of the year then are you on the road selling tobacco?

E: I work about, about six months. About six months out of the year.

T: How many months in flu-cured and how many months in burley?

E: I work, uh, work about, I work about four months there and about two months here. So I work six, about six months, averages out. We come out here and then we leave and have a break during Christmas and that gives the farmers time to, for the tobacco to come in order and for them to get it to market. And they'll get it stripped and get it to market.

So, we have about three weeks in there before we come back, during Christmas. Then once we come (T: Um um.) back out after Christmas, it lasts about a month--three weeks to a month--when we come back. And if you don't have a season or something, it lasts longer then, you know. 'Cause out here you got to have rain to get it out of the barns, you know. And uh, a lot of times you just have to wait, you know, until you get that season. That's what they're all talking about right now, you know. They need some rain, you know, so they can get it on out--get it up here.

131 T: Okay. So are you hired by the warehouse (E: Yeah.) manager?

E: Right. I'm hired by the warehouse. Every auctioneer's hired by the warehouse. We work for the warehouse and the farmer. Auctioneer's working for the farmer all the time. He tries to get as much money for it, for the crop as he can, you know. (T: Um um.) Uh, the companies are trying to pay as little for it as they can. So-- (T: Um um.) So uh, I--the auctioneer works definitely for the farmer.

139 T: Okay. How are auction--tobacco auctioneers, uh, paid? Is it by the amount sold, or per day?

E: Uh, they're paid different ways. They're uh--some people you can be paid just commission off the pounds you sell, or you can be guaranteed, you know, have a guaranteed figure that you'll make no matter what they sell, you know. And then if they sell over x amount, you know, they might probably pay you according. But every auctioneer when they go to work, you know, is hired differently. There's no certain way, you know, once they, (T: Um um.) you know. If you--like here, I get guaranteed, 'cause, you know, it's a smaller job. I couldn't afford to come out here unless I was guaranteed so much, you know, to carry home. (T: Um um.) It wouldn't be worth my while. But uh, some of these bigger jobs, they probably get paid by the pounds--commission off the pounds.

150 T: So, you've been working for planters warehouse for two years?

E: Three years.

T: Three years. This is your third year.

E: Uh huh.

T: [pause] How did you decide to come to Bowling Green and do this market?

E: I was uh--another auctioneer that's here--he knew they needed someone so he called, told me about it. And so, I called and that's when we got it worked out like that.

T: Is that how you--auctioneers normally find their jobs, is through grapevines?

E: And through the company people. Uh, through people--tobacco company people working for the companies. If you know a lot of people, they'll try to help you get a job someplace if they here about it, you know, call you. Getting an auctioneering job, any tobacco auctioneer job is hard to do. It's hard to get a good job, because once an auctioneer goes somewhere and they're satisfied with it, then he's not going to go anywhere unless he gets sick or dies or decides to quit--most of the time. So, you really just have to bide your time and wait to get a good job, you know. And then once you get one, most the time you'll have, you know, it as long as you want. I know, uh, there's uh, several auctioneers that uh, they've been going selling for twenty-five or thirty years in the same warehouse and the same market. And they'll keep right on going until something happens to them. It's kind of hard to ever get in and get a good job. You just got to be lucky. Sometimes you get lucky and be in right place and the right time, you know. But, uh, most times you got to have some help. Somebody has to help you, you know you need to know someone, help you get a job--a good job.

173 T: Do you have any preference auctioning burley versus auctioning flu-cured?

E: Well, for the past three years here it's been the one price, you know. There's really not much selling to it. It's more allocation then selling, you know. But I'd rather sell it. I'd always rather sell it, because with allocation--like here we have nine companies. All of them are bidding the same thing. Well that's--you're just trying to divide it out. You know what I mean? (T: Yes.) It's a whole lot harder than selling it 'cause when your selling it you don't have everyone bidding. You know, maybe you got two or three companies bidding, you know. And uh, I'd much rather sell it. Uh, in Wilson this year we sold--it sold until about probably the third or fourth week in the season. Then it all went to a dollar eighty-five and stayed there for about five or six weeks. So it was the same thing at home this year. See, it's allocation, you know. It's all bringing the same thing. And it makes your job hard because where you're satisfying some, the other ones don't feel like they're getting their, you know, their share. So, makes it kinds of a hard job. Especially if you know 'em all and you like 'em all and you know all the supervisors and

everything. Well, you're trying to help all of them and you really can't because when it gets right down to it there's not but so much tobacco, you know, to go around. And I know some of them get left out. So, you just have to do the best you can, you know. Uh, I try to laugh it off a lot.
[laughter] I've laughed my way out of a lot of things.

T: Have you? [laughter]

E: Yeah. You know, when they get mad with you. Even though they get mad with you, they don't really--they don't stay mad with you, you know. I've--I've had supervisors come to me, you know, really get me down in the country. But then once it's all over with, they come back to me and apologize or something. You know, it's just part of it. It's just part of it.

198 T: How do they let you know that they're mad? Do the buyers--.

E: They'll take you by the arm and carry you over there to the side [laughter]. (T: Do the buyers--) And say, "Son, you're not treating me right. You got to do me better, you know. You got to do me better." 'Cause all these companies are trying to get orders from, you know, different customers overseas and stuff. The company that does the best job, of course, is going to get more of an order the next year, you know. Like a lot of--Like overseas, you know, three of four companies will be buying for the same person, you know. Like you're buying for China, or uh, Thailand, or Brazil. Any of those countries like that, you know, they'll split the order up. Like if there's so many million pounds, you know, they'll divide the order up between two or three companies. Whoever does the best job for them maybe next year they'll get more of that order, you know. They kind of split it up.

209 T: The--the--As you're walking down the rows of tobacco, you're on the opposite side of the buyers.

E: Um um.

T: And they seem to be lined up in a--a particular order each time.

E: Um um. They uh, the order is uh, based on how much, what percent they bought the year before. And most the time it's based on three years. They go back to three years and see how much each company's bought. And then that's, and then they get (T: Okay.) their choice as far as getting in line. They have their choice. You know, like the one whose bought the most, which here is Southwestern, well they get their pick wherever they want to be in line. Therefore they

get first pick. And of course, they want to get right straight in front of the auctioneer. So, they're always right in the middle. You know, right straight in front of the auctioneer. And then it goes from there, you know.

T: So, they don't necessarily want to be first in line. But they want to be--

E: No, they uh, really the first pick wants to be right in the middle of the line, so he's right in front of you.

T: Oh.

E: Uh, that's, uh, and--and that's true here and at home to. All markets are like that. You're right--you're--See by being in the middle, you're looking right at the pile you're selling. You're right on the pile you're selling. Of course, he can get your attention a whole lot better if he's looking right straight in front of you, you know.

227 T: So, you have to keep track of selling more to the people who normally buy more?

E: Um um. Um um.

T: I imagine that's a hard job to do.

E: Yeah. It's just like out here, you know, everything's on percentage out here right now.

T: What do you mean by percentage?

E: Well like Southwestern, they--they're getting about forty percent--forty to forty-three percent. So you know they're going to get forty percent. And then, uh, like, Dibrell out here, there, in Bowling Green. Dibrell's, uh, a pretty strong company here. They usually get about eighteen percent. So, there's sixty-eighty, uh, fifty-eight percent. And then you've got seven or eight more companies to get the remainder. [chuckles] You know what I mean? (T: Um um.) So it makes it pretty tough. Some of them get cut down; they won't get but three or four percent, you know. Just makes it hard. Makes it hard sometimes.

236 T: You mentioned that everyone in the burley market is bidding at the same price.

E: Um um.

T: I've noticed that they all kind of have their hands up.

E: Um um.

T: Do they go ahead and let you know that they want to bid or are you just assuming that they are.

E: Well, once all of 'em gots their hands up, you know, they're all bidding, you know. They're all bidding. And out here, the best thing to do is to keep it up and not drop it, 'cause if you ever drop your hand out here then you lose your rotation as far as, you know, getting another pile knocked to you. (T: Um um.) It's uh, it's tough right now, when it all brings the same thing.

242 T: Now how is it different in flu-cured? You're selling more than you are allocating?

E: Yeah. Yeah, we have, uh, see in the burley, a person can sell their whole crop out in one day. Like he'll bring his whole crop up here and sell it out in one day. At home, you are booked. You won't sell but a certain percent every week. Like you, (T: Oh.) like here, you know, your man will sell his, what he's raised, he'll sell it all in one day. Where at home it would take him about ten or twelve weeks, on the average to sell out. (T: Um um.) They sell so much a week every week (T: Okay.) until they get through selling. They--They have to book it, you know.

T: Do they have a larger allotment of flu-cured?

E: Yeah, there's more tobacco--there's more flu-cured I would say, you know, uh, it's just the way it's handled. There's a difference in handling it, you know. Now like at home it's all cured, you know, with heat, gas, or oil, or wood. And it's in bulk barns. And you see what they have to do, they--they empty their barns and they have to fill 'em right back up, you know. So whatever they take out, you know, they bring on up to market. And then they turn right around and start putting it back in again. But really, see they cut the stalk, you know, you have the whole stalk, where at home you get so many leaves each time. Like they go there at first to get the lugs, that's four or five--three or four leaves; then they keep coming on up, you know, to cutters; and then your tips.

257 T: Lugs, cutters, and tips?

E: Um um.

T: What do you call those--the grades?

E: Well, your lugs is--are the bottom of the stalk. Its real thin tobacco. It doesn't weigh as much. Your "C" tobacco, which is graded as "C" on the floor, is cutters, which is like it's got more body to it, and more oil to it, but it's

still on the thin side. And then your, tips, of course, are thicker--heavier and thicker at the top. And uh, it's the same out here, but they cut the whole stalk and then they strip it. You know, as they get to it you know, like they'll take the flyings--they call it flyings out here--and seconds.

T: What are the flyings? The flyings?

E: That's your lugs; the bottom of the stalk.

T: Okay.

E: And then you have your seconds. And then you have your tips out here, too. But the difference is, you know, they cut the whole stalk and then they strip it off the stalk as they, uh, as they're baling it, you know. It's--it's just a whole lot different. It's a whole lot different. (T: Um um.) Now at home you have more big farmers than you do here. You don't have as many farmers, but a whole lot bigger farmers. Here, you know, a man that's got--a man that's got ten or twelve acres here, you know, he's a pretty big farmer out here. And, but at home that would be a real small, you know.

271 T: What's the average size acreage in North Carolina.

E: In North Carolina, uh, right now the average farmer probably--depends, probably twenty-five to thirty acres, on the average farmer. And then it goes right on up, you know. Big farmers, you get right on up in a hundred acres or a hundred and fifty acres. [Noise from forklift driving through warehouse.] Uh, we had so much trouble at home, as far as help--you don't--can't get the help. We have about--all the help we have now are Mexican--is Mexican--or Mexican labor. And uh, plus automatic croppers. We have automatic primers now, where you can go out there and just--you get right there in the row you know and it crops it, you know, as you're driving through, you know, it crops it. Either that or Mexican help. We don't have it, we just don't have the labor that we used to have. So people are not, you know, as involved in it as they used to be. Like right where I'm from, I live in a small town, you know, and everyone used to put in tobacco. You know, that was the thing years ago, you know. All the people that could work, that's what they were busy doing during the season. But everyone's just gotten away from it. It's gotten more automated, you know, more machines and more--they've just done away with the labor part of it.

284 T: I've noticed that at this burley market they're very few people, uh, still tying in the hands.

E: Um um.

T: How has that change come about over the years?

E: They've, uh, it's just gotten--it was too much trouble. It was just too much trouble and too time consuming. And the companies can handle it a whole lot better the way it is now--baled up, you know. Uh--It--I think what changed it was like here, too, I've talked to a lot of the farmers, they don't have the help, you know, like they used to have. They can't get help out here. And uh, I think that's the reason it went to that. You know, went to bales. It was just easier. It's an easy way of handling it for both the farmer and the company, than that hand tied. And that was a job, I tell ya. [laughter]

T: It looks labor intensive.

E: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

295 T: Did the government have anything to do with going to bales? Did they promote it at first?

E: Now, I'm not sure of that. I'm not sure. But I'd--I'd probably say, you know, you know 'cause, you can't do much without them, without--without their okay, see. I'm sure, you know, they'd talked about it and 'greed to it.

299 T: Hum. What do you think keeps [engine of truck starting up in warehouse] the buyers at the burley market from competing with each other and raising the price to get the tobacco they way that they do in the flu-cured?

E: Well, I--I feel like its just--One company's not going to do anything without--one company waits for another company. One is not going to jump the gun and get ahead and, uh, start something, you know, they're kind of scared of one another. 'Cause once one goes up, all the rest of 'em go up. So, you know, and uh, you say like, we have nine companies here, but you--Southwestern, you know, they own Thorpe Greenville. So, it's really the same company. You know, that they, they've got two in line but it's the same company merged together. And, so just like Monk [A.C. Monk] and Austin, they've merged together, you know. Even though they've got two buyers on the sale, they, uh, still are merged together. [pause] I don't--I'm beginning to believe that it's kind of like, uh, price fixin' or something. (T: Um um.) You know what I mean? I mean all these companies get their heads together and say, you know, I'm not going to

pay but so much and we're going to have a certain average in this crop and that's what we--that's what we're going to pay. You know, and one doesn't jump--one doesn't get ahead--one company doesn't get ahead of the other. They all sit back and wait, it seems like to me. I don't--It's really not all that fair, I don't think. But that's just the way it's going to be. 'Cause the companies control it so much. They have so much control over it.

T: Uh huh.

E: Uh--

T: That's interesting.

314 E: Yeah. They, uh, and I feel like in years to come, I feel like that, it won't be an auctioneering situ--there won't be any auction system because it's not that much of an auctioneering system now. I's just getting up there and knocking it, you know. And I feel like, uh, it'll be carried straight to the plants. I fell like that in years to come, when the farmer raises his tobacco that it will be, uh, loaded up on the truck and carry it right straight to the plant. And they'll have a regrader sitting there, and have a grader sitting there, and whatever it grades, it'll bring a certain price for that grade, you know, as it comes in. But uh, evidently the companies still feel like they can get it a whole lot cheaper the way they're doing it. They do or they'd already changed. They'd already changed it. This is the cheapest part of the process. This buying the tobacco off the floor. I mean it really is, 'cause it--when I used to work--I worked for Export tobacco company. I was a foreman in the picking and grading crew. And that was when I was eighteen years old. And uh, at that time, uh, processed tobacco was forty-three dollars a pound, when it was bleached and everything right ready to go in the cigarette.

T: Um um. About what year was that?

E: Well, that was back in the seventies. Let's see. I'm thirty-six now; that was eighteen years ago. [laughter]
So--

T: That's considerably cheaper than what it's selling for right now. [E: coughs] It was a dollar seventy-four.

E: Yeah. Oh yeah. It was--it was a whole lot cheaper back then. Yeah. Oh yeah. But it's still the cheapest part of the whole process--buying this tobacco off the floor. They make so much money--Make a whole lot of money with it.

331 T: How is burley used in the tobacco industry versus flu-cured?

E: Well, they uh, flu-cured is in all cigarettes, you know. That's all, that's all cigarettes. Out here in the burley, you know, this tobacco, some of it's used for cigarettes; some of it's used for cigars. You know, different--it's just a different flavor--the burley has a different flavor, you know, to it, than, than at home. It's just a different smell, and a different flavor. Uh, it's about all I know about that.

T: Okay. Does flu-cured crops, do they have a pool?

E: Uh huh. Yes.

T: Like the burley has a government pool?

E: Um um.

T: Do they operated in the same ways?

E: Yep. Operate in the same ways. Once it goes into the pool, like if it drops down enough, you know, and goes into the pool. Then the companies just go back and buy it out of the pool, you see, whenever they need it. They just go back and purchase it from them. It works same, both here and at home--same way. Uh, right now, the--the--the stabilization, or the pool, they don't have that much in, you know, don't have that much on hand. But uh, and that's good. I like that. But uh--

345 T: Has any tobacco gone to pool in this market yet.

E: No. No. None has gone in. And I don't feel like any will go in it. Uh, maybe after Christmas, who knows, it might--the price might drop a little bit when we come back after Christmas. But I kind of doubt it. 'Cause there is a shortage right now of burley.

T: Okay. Who determines the price that you start the bid at?

E: The man that, uh, we have--you always have a man that starts the sale. A man who starts the sale, and he calls out the price of each pile. And then you start from there, and--and we haven't had to go too far, you know. It's all been bringing the same thing, but most the time, if you start it and no one comes in, you start dropping down, you know, 'til you get a bid. Then once you get a bid you start going back up.

352 T: So he starts the bid on each separate pile?

E: Um um. You have a man that starts each pile. And then you just, whatever he starts it at, that's where you start, you know.

T: How--Does he start it according to what the government official has put on for the pool price?

E: No. No.

T: How does he determine what to start it at?

E: Well, he just--you look at--you know--you really know you got an idea about what each pile's going to bring, you know, if you've already seen some sold, you know. And uh, I always, I was always taught to start em' high. If you don't start 'em high you won't ever get it anyway, you know? [laughter] If you start 'em too low, you know you won't ever get there, so--. The people I've always worked for, they start it high and then you let it go down. And it satisfies the farmers, too. If you're out there trying to help a man, you know, he wants to hear it start high anyway, you know, whether it brings it or not, you know, see--. And a lot of times you know its not going to bring that, but you start it up there anyway, you know, just trying to satisfy them. You know 'cause, you're doing all you can trying to make as much money as you can for them.

T: What are some of the things that are going through your head as you're auctioneering off some tobacco. What do you--?

E: Well, you're just trying to--I'm just--you know--you--when you get in there, you uh, you're trying to remember you know, uh, who as far as--most of them, most of them get only a certain percent and you try to keep up with the percentage, as to who gets what. Uh, there's lot of things going through my mind when I'm up there. Sometimes, you know, you uh, depends on how the tobacco's selling. If it's selling real high, you know, it puts a lot of pressure on you. Uh, it gets--It's tough sometimes.

370 T: Do you have to concentrate on the chanting process or does that come as second nature?

E: Nah. It just comes right out, you know. (T: It does.) Yeah. That's just something that's done automatically once you've done it enough. You know, I don't really worry about that.

373 T: How did you pick up your particular technique?

E: I just--just started. Just started out real slow, you know, and kept practicing. Sold uh--I'd be riding down the road

I'm liable to sell anything: you know, light poles, mailboxes, whatever, when I first got started. 'Cause it's, you know, every auctioneer's different. There's no auctioneer that's the same. As many--if you go--I don't care how many you go hear, all of 'em's different, you know. So you have to--there's no certain patterns as something to go by. You know, you just have to, you get--you--you feel like--when you feel like you're comfortable, you know, with your chant--what you're doing, you know, then you try to improve on it. 'Cause there's no one alike. There's no auctioneer alike. All of 'em's different.

381 T: What kinds of things do they teach you in tobacco auctioneering school? Or was this a regular auctioneering school?

E: Well, in tobacco auctioneer school, you know, they'd line up, you know, and uh, some of you would pretend to be the companies, and then you'd have the ticket marker back there and you know you'd take turns, you know, going up and down the line practicing, you know, who to knock to different companies and stuff. But, to get your licence, you know, they just teach you the basic fundamentals. Then you have to take that and go on from there, you know.

385 T: How do you get licensed?

E: Well you have to go, and you have to take your exam, and you have to go, you know, have course--classes and stuff, then you have to go to Raleigh [North Carolina], and they have an exam up there, and take that. And it lasts about four hours.

T: Do you have a written exam [E: coughs] and an oral?

E: No, written exam.

T: It's all written.

E: Uh huh. It's all written.

T: How have other auctioneers that you've run across in the industry influenced your chant or your methods.

E: [pause] Uh, [pause] I don't--they haven't really influenced me that much, it's just that--I've just had to learn basically on my own, you know. I've had to do--I've had to uh, I've got--I've just--I just have my own style. You can't--You can go listen and get pointers from other auctioneers, you know, if you really watch 'em, you know, it can help you some. You really just have to do your own thing, [laughter] when it gets right down to it.

395 T: What do you do in the off season?

E: Oh, different things. We have--I uh, I've sold cars, and uh--but at home, see, you have to get out and see your customers. So it takes about--once you've go--once I get back home, it's not long before you start riding. And you ride for about a month--about six weeks seeing your customers--trying to get them to designate back to your warehouse. See, because here, you don't have any designation. Where at home, you do.

T: What do you mean by a designation?

E: Once he designates to a certain warehouse. Each warehouse has a number, a warehouse number, and he designates to that warehouse, particular warehouse. He has to stay there until like, through the uh, fourth week of the season. Then during the season you have like three or four redesignation periods: a week at a time where if he wants to change from one warehouse to another, he can redesignate and sell it. But he has to wait a certain length of time to be able to sell at another warehouse. But once you designated to a particular warehouse, you're really there, you know, as far as, you know, you know where you're going to be. Uh, here see, they can sell any place. There's no designation. You know, a farmer here, he can--he can bring it here, or he can carry it up the street or he can go anywhere with it. But at home, once you designate to a particular warehouse you're really obligated, committed to that warehouse, at least through the first four or five weeks of the season, once it opens up. Then if you're not happy, you know, you have a chance to move, to move. But it makes it really bad, because you lose that selling time. See, once you've, once you--if you redesignate--

411 END OF SIDE ONE

* * *

000 BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

004 T: I was wondering if you could demonstrate a little bit of your, your chant and maybe sell this pile of tobacco here, if you're comfortable.

E: Well, now see--what I'm--what I'm saying is, this is, this has brought a dollar and seventy-four cents. It's going to bring a dollar seventy-four cents but--

T: What if it's, uh, flu-cured then.

011 E: Alright, well if its a, its like a, like if you started to say--[twelve seconds of auctioneering] But, uh, it's a whole lot more fun selling than it is knocking, you know. I enjoy selling. But all we're doing right now is just knocking. It's all bringing the same price, so you don't get a chance to really auction that much, you know. It's a dollar seventy-four right now out here.

T: You're--now when you're doing your--you're chant, are saying that it's a dollar or are you just going with the seventy four?

E: No, it's a dollar most time, we--you see he'll start, the man who starts it you know. I don't say a dollar every time, see but it's still known. (T: Right.) You know, that's what it is. See like, he'll start it here, he'll, he's liable to say eighty or eighty-five and they automatically know it's a dollar eighty-five.

T: Was that difficult when tobacco started selling around uh, ninety-nine to a dollar, when you had to go into the next digit. Is that difficult for an auctioneer?

E: No. Uh, the hardest number I have is a dollar eighty-eight. If it ever gets hung up on eighty-eight, I'm in trouble.

T: Why is that hard?

E: Because I get tongue-tied. [laughter] Out of all the numbers, eighty-eight is--is terrible, to me. It probably doesn't bother someone else. But I've always, I've always dreaded, you know, when we're first starting up, I say, "Please don't let it get hung up on a dollar eighty-eight." Any other number but that. [laughter]

T: So you hope it goes up for the farmer, but you don't want it to get to a dollar eighty-eight. [laughter]

E: As long as it--uh, a dollar eighty-nine would be fine. [laughter] Ninety or something. That eighty-eight, though, is tough for me. It sure is.

043 T: Do you auction anything besides tobacco? Do you ever do property sales?

E: Yeah. I do different--I do different kinds of sales, you know. It's completely different, you know, from tobacco. Tobacco is, uh, fast. It's a fast sale and you're walking down the row and you're probably selling--I know at home we'll sell about two-hundred thousand pounds in about three hours. And that's in, uh, uh, anywhere from a hundred seventy-five pounds to two-hundred fifty pound sheets. And

out here, it's up to seven hundred and fifty pounds that you can sell in one, on one basket. (T: Okay.) But at home, the maximum is two-hundred and fifty pounds, that you can-- you can sell. And its all in sheets at home. Right here it's baled up. At home it's all in sheets.

57 T: Now, by a sheet, is it an actual sheet?

E: Uh huh. It's in a sheet. You know, a burlap sheet. That's the way it's all handled, in the flu-cured.

T: And it's loose--loose in the sheet?

E: Uh huh. Loose-leaf in the sheet. Um um.

T: So when you're selling, uh, say an estate sale, it's much slower. Do you have a different chant that you use?

E: Yeah. Well it's just--it's just a whole--it's just slow, you know. It's just slow, you know. And uh, I sell--I sell different kinds of things, you know. I do a lot of, uh, charity work. I, uh, you know for, I sell--I sell sales for uh, for different churches and for different communities, and stuff like that. Selling, you know, crafts and 'bout anything, you know--uh, furniture, all kinds of stuff. But it's different. It's just a little slower. You just have to go about it slower. 'Cause people have to make their minds up 'fore they bid, you know. It's not like walking down through the sale. They--most time--in tobacco--they already got their minds made up. When you're selling something else, you know, they don't. You have to give them time to stop and think about it.

078 T: Uh huh. Which do you prefer then?

E: Selling tobacco. I'd rather sell tobacco. I've always done that. I think I enjoy that, uh, better than any of the other types of auctioneering.

T: Do you travel with other auctioneers to markets, or--

E: No.

T: You just go on your own?

E: Um um. Just on my own.

T: Uh, so, what other jobs did you have in the tobacco business before auctioneering? Did you ever do tagging?

E: Well, I--

T: You'd mentioned that you--

E: I, uh, used to hand tickets, you know, when I was little growing up, you know, I'd hand tickets to the ticket marker. Or uh, I've done about anything on the warehouse floor as far as working on--in the warehouse in tobacco. Put in a farm. We always farmed; put in tobacco, raised tobacco.

T: Do you still raise some now?

E: No. We lease ours out, now. Ours, uh, we just lease it out. We have a person who, you know, looks after the farm and tends it. But we don't do it, you know, ourselves--my mother and I. (T: Um um.) Just too much--it'd be too much. And you know, back years ago once, when Daddy got killed, and mother, she didn't want to go and jeopardize and start putting up a bunch of money like Daddy used to, you know, to operate with and stuff. So we felt, it'd be better just to lease it out. Then that way we don't have all the worries and aggravations. [Laughter] (T: Sure.) You know--

T: But you still get to keep your--your farm.

E: Oh, yeah.

T: That's nice.

E: Yeah. Yeah. Um um. [pause]

104 T: Is there anything else you'd like to add about your auctioneering career or the tobacco industry?

E: The only thing I have to add is that I hope it continues. Because I hope we always have tobacco and I hope we always have the auctioneer system. And uh, I hope I always have a job doing it. I don't know how many years that it will--it will stay like this. But hopefully, you know, it will. And I will have a job--always have a job.

T: Have you kept track of the pounds or number of piles you've auctioned off over the years?

E: No. No. Uh, last--this year I sold--well, the past, for the past three years in Wilson I've sold over ten million pounds each year. So, that's a whole lot of tobacco to sell. And out here it's a smaller job. I probably won't sell but about, about three million pounds--between three and four million. Ten million pounds is a whole lot in those small sheets. (T: Um um.) Well, we have two warehouses at home; we sell one warehouse one day and the other one the next. Like we fill up one warehouse and go

down there and sell it, and we have the other one the next day. And while we're selling that one, we're filling this one up again. [laughter]

125 T: How many buyers will come here from one tobacco company?

E: Well, there was nine companies represented--there was nine companies represented here. Nine different companies. At home, there's ten. But then you have some smaller markets where at sometimes you don't have but three or four companies represented--on these real small markets. Uh, say markets that don't--don't sell but like, you know, ten or twelve million pounds the whole market. Sometimes they won't have but three or four, uh, companies on there. The companies feel like they put the people where there's more tobacco, you know. They a--they've cut back on their help. The companies have cut back on the buyers. They--they've cut an awful lot of buyers. And uh, they just go to the bigger markets. Most time they cover the bigger markets. The smaller markets are playing out. Just like at home, you know, a lot of little local markets are closing up 'cause they just don't make--they can't get tobacco up there, you know, enough tobacco to justify the companies coming. So, a lot of 'em are closed up.

T: For instance, uh, how many buyers will Reynold's, R. J. Reynold's (E: Um um.) send here to this market? Do they send the same person to stay here throughout the whole market?

E: No, well--well see here, we just have--this is like in Wilson we have five sets. That's a five set market. We have five different sets of buyers. And here in Bowling Green, it's a set and a half. That means we have a full set that stays all the time. And then, every other day, we have a swing set that comes from Owensboro [Kentucky]. And they come here like twice a week, every other day. So that's a set and a half market.

T: And the full time is called a "full"?

E: Uh huh. One--that's a full set here. We have one full set here. And then a swing set.

153 T: Does--do you feel that you know the buyers pretty well? Do you see the same people every year after year?

E: Yeah. But they move 'em around, now. The buyers are all moved around, you know, shifted around. They have to go wherever they're told to go. Whatever the orders tell--whoever orders tells 'em to go, they have to go. They can put in a request to go back to a certain market or

something, but you know, they really don't, they don't have any, you know, uh, they don't really have that much say so about it. They just have to go wherever they're told to go once they're working for a company. Out here, we've had some of the same buyers that have been coming back here, you know, for the past three years. This year they've moved them around some. We have probably three or four new buyers, that we haven't been having. But uh, they're going to move them around like that.

T: Do you meet with the buyers before the auction to get to know them?

E: Yeah. I try to get--I try to know them as--as much--I hang around them as much as possible, you know. And uh, it helps a whole lot 'cause your friends will--you make a mistake sometimes and they'll kind of overlook it, you know. Whereas if they don't like you they're liable to really say something about it, you know. So it helps to friends with 'em and know all of 'em. Uh, it--in Wilson we have so much supervision there every day 'cause it is a big market, you know, I've gotten to know a lot of the supervisors and the people that are on up in the tobacco industry, you know. That helps me a whole lot, too, knowing them. Uh, I've got a lot of friends in the tobacco business.

172 T: I've noticed as the group moves down the row of tobacco that you're selling, every once in a while they'll stop and people are looking over the tobacco. What's going on at that point?

E: Well, a lot of times--you know, they--like if they have their supervisors behind them, they might have one--might have put one in the wrong grade. Might--might have to change the grade. Might need to go someplace else, you know. Or he might need to get him back there and chew him out a little bit 'cause he's bought the wrong kind of tobacco or something, you know.

T: So, is it usually the supervisor that stops what's going on? Or buyer?

E: Well, sometimes the buyers does, but most times it's the supervisor behind him that--that stops the sale. He--he might just want to pull his buyer out for a minute and talk to him, you know. Or he might just stop to give him--give him another grade, or give him some more grades, or something, you know. But, most time it's--it's in a sale you know, unless it's--If nothing major happens, you know, most times there's no supervision and we just go right on through it. But the supervisor's got a job to do and he just shows, you know, he's got authority, you know. When he

[laughter] stops the sale and pulls someone out. That's just showing his authority.

T: Is there usually a supervisor from each company at each sale?

E: Yeah. And sometimes there's a whole--sometimes there's a whole lot more than just one. You know, sometimes it looks like to me a truckload when they get out. Here, it's not that bad. Here, you don't--you don't see as many supervisors as you do in the other markets--the larger markets. They stay around the larger markets. They get paid a whole lot of money, too. [laughter] I'll tell you that. [laughter]

195 T: I haven't seen any women buyers at this market.

E: Now, well we have one now, Gwen. She was--but she's pregnant. She's fixin' to have a baby, so she's not able to follow the sale, but she was in here today.

T: Oh, she was.

E: Uh huh. And she follows it in Wilson. And uh, she buys for American. And she's been buying with them probably seven or eight years. I've known some more women that were in it--the girls that were in it you know, but seems like--I don't know, they just kind of get out of it you know. They lose interest in it or something. I know years ago they would uh, uh, Universal was training and they had three or four girls they were training to be buyers. And I think one of 'em out of the crowd made it. You know, and the rest of 'em just lost interest in it, I guess, or couldn't make it. Because with some companies you have so many grades to learn, you know, like Universal, they can grade anything on the floor. It doesn't matter what it is. And you have to learn over a hundred different grades. You know, it's--it's kind of hard to do.

T: These are grades that the tobacco company uses?

E: Uses. Uh huh. As far as placing which--as far--they put a grade on it as far as which way they want the tobacco to go: whether it's domestic or whether it's going to be sent overseas, you know.

T: When you say put a grade on it, is that actually written on the ticket.

E: No, well, see why they--once the--once the pile is sold and you--and wherever you tell--whatever company that--you--you give it to, and he calls his grade out. (T: After--) And

the man behind you is marking. He's--he's writing it out on the ticket, you know. He's the ticket marker. He's marking it down. So, once you, once you knock it to a particular company, then it's up to him to put the grade on it. So the grade's not called out 'til after it's knocked to a company. And then he calls a grade out. (T: Um um.) And it's hard for a ticket marker, I'll tell you that. He has to remember--he's having to remember the company and what it brought and then what the grade is. And by the time he's writing that down, you've already sold another one. So he really stays about one pile behind the whole time. So he has to keep one in his head while he's writing one down. So that's kind of tough. And I want to tell you that, a ticket marker's got a hard job. He's got a real hard job.

T: It sounds difficult.

223 E: Um um. He's got to have--you've got to have concentration. That's all. You've got to block out whatever's happening. No matter, you know it all the people's around there, noise and everything, you can't think about that. You've got to think about what you're doing, you know. And it's difficult.

T: Does the ticket marker work for the warehouse?

E: Uh hum. Ticket markers are hired by the warehouse, too.

T: And then I've--there are women that come along after that with a ribbon.

E: They're tagging.

T: And they work for--

E: The companies.

T: The companies.

E: They're hired by the companies--the tobacco companies--to tag. And like, they'll put a different color, you know, different color tag or ribbon on it, you know, as to what it's graded. Whatever it's graded you know, they have certain tags to put on it. So that when they came--come to ship it out, they know, you know, which to get and which not to get, you know.

T: Well, everything seems to run very smoothly as--when you watch the auction going on.

E: Um um.

- T: And, it's a part of everyone having their specific job.
- E: That's right. That's right. Everyone has a job to do. And if they all do it like they ought to, most the time it does run pretty smooth, you know.
- T: So, do you think you have the best job of all? Of all the jobs?
- E: Well, I enjoy it, but the auctioneer is never right. He's always wrong. And, uh, you just have to learn--You have to get a tough skin, you know. Your skin's go to get a little tough. You can't take everything that people say to you at heart, you know. Uh, you can't let everything get to you because really and truly they don't mean it. You know, most the time they don't mean it. But, uh, you all--you have to cover for the buyers. It's just like if they--if you're in a crop and they're not bidding on it and all of a sudden you look up and there's your boss. And, you know, there's your boss. And he gets down there to the end of the row. He says, "Why didn't you get any of this tobacco?" you know. And he'll--and the buyer will turn around and say, "Well, I was bidding on it. He just didn't knock me one." And I already know he wasn't bidding on it, you know. [laughter] And then he'll come to me and say "Well, son, we were bidding on that tobacco." And I'll say, "I'm just as sorry as I can be, you know. I'll make it up to you, you know." But I already knew he wasn't bidding on it, but I'm trying to cover for him, you know, see. So, it works, you know. You try to work with one another.
- T: So you feel caught in the middle quite a bit.
- E: Oh yeah. [laughter] I'm never right. Oh, I've never been right yet [laughter] that I know of. Never. But, you've just got to laugh it off. That's the whole thing about it. You've just got to have a good attitude about it. 'Cause it's all part of it. It's just all part of the business. People getting mad, and then getting happy again. So, it's going to happen. It's going to happen.
- T: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add as I wind this up?
- E: Uh, nothing I can think of. I think you've covered it pretty well. [laughter]
- T: Well, it's been a pleasure talking to you.
- E: Yeah. It's been nice talking with you.
- T: And I hope you enjoy your stay here.

E: Yeah. I like it out here. I like Bowling Green. It's a nice place.

335 END OF INTERVIEW